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AUTHOR	Elliott, Mark; Palubinsky, Beth; Tierney, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Five programs in the Bridges to Work demonstration have functioned as a labor market exchange--with the main services being job matching and transportation coordination--for job-ready inner-city workers and suburban employment. The logistics of transportation have been simple; the basics of employment have been an ongoing challenge. Sites have struggled with recruitment because of strong economic growth, insufficient credibility, and local employment organizations reluctant to work with Bridges. Revised recruitment includes expansion of original neighborhoods and more creative and flexible approaches to outreach. Since most participants were not job-ready, sites have added job readiness training and support for recent placements to boost retention. Four principles to guide planning and implementation of transportation services are the following: flexible, extensive routes and schedules; punctual, reliable service; quick response to unplanned events and emergencies; and no transportation for other purposes. The Bridges program should include the transportation provider early in the program planning process, select one with the capacity and vehicles that best fit the program, select firms whose main business is transportation, and avoid changing providers. Bridges' experience shows transportation alone will not connect applicants and jobs. Intensive recruitment, job preparation, and retention services make more effective programs. (Contains an appendix with site descriptions and a contact list for the five sites: Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee, and St. Louis.) (YLB)

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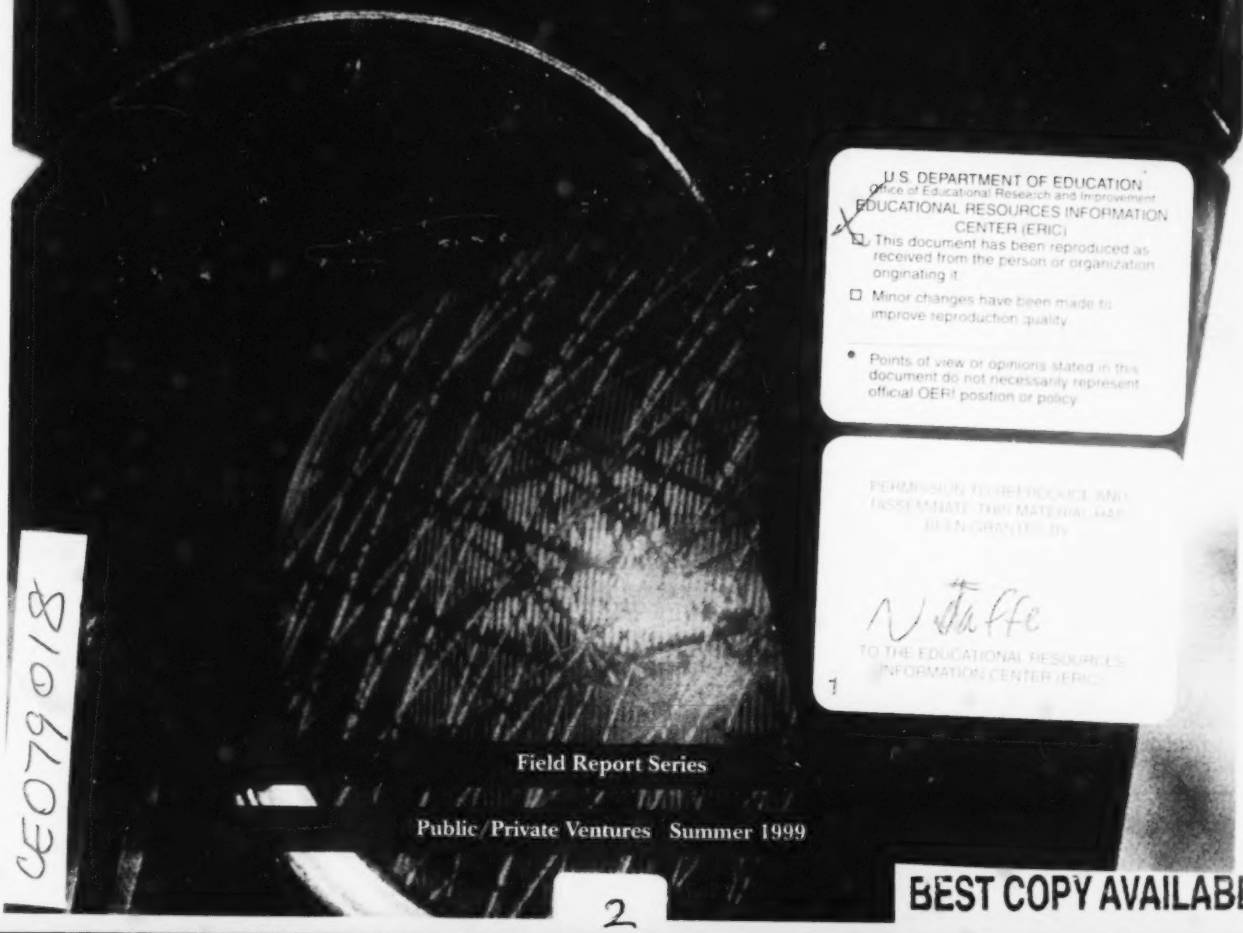
OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS ON THE WAY TO WORK

Bridges to Work Field Report

Mark Elliott, Beth Palubinsky and Joseph Tierney



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Introduction

Several years of sustained economic growth in the United States have resulted in the creation of over 16 million jobs and reduced the unemployment rate to its lowest level in nearly 30 years. Rapid economic growth coupled with policy changes, such as the increase in the minimum wage, have recently raised the incomes of those at the bottom—a welcome reversal after more than two decades of falling real earnings among the poor.

Nevertheless, policymakers and practitioners remain concerned about those left behind, a disproportionate number of whom live in central cities. Indeed, the proportion of poor urban residents has risen by over half since 1969 and by 1996 was more than double the share of poor suburban residents.[1] Particular concern has focused on what to do about communities in which poverty is highly concentrated, which have doubled in population between 1970 and 1990.[2]

As poverty has become more prevalent in central cities, employment has concentrated in the suburbs. Over the past 30 years, suburban job growth has far exceeded that of central cities, to the point that the suburbs are now home to a majority of metropolitan area jobs. This pattern of concentrated poverty and dispersed opportunity has led many researchers and policymakers to support reverse commuting as one of a number of strategies to reduce poverty in the inner city. Such concerns led to the development of the five-city Bridges to Work demonstration funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and The Ford, MacArthur and Rockefeller Foundations. Public/Private Ventures is overseeing and evaluating the initiative, which will be completed in early 2001.

Interest in reverse commuting, or mobility strategies, has risen in the last few years because of two additional factors:

- Rapid economic growth and low unemployment have made suburban employers more amenable to considering sources of labor—such as low-income urban residents—that they might not have sought out in the past.
- The passage of time-limited welfare in the form of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 means that millions of poor, low-skilled adults will need to secure employment in order to make ends meet. This challenge will be particularly acute in central cities where the number of welfare recipients required to leave the rolls exceeds the number of entry-level jobs.

These concerns are manifest in the substantial increase in resources available from the federal government for mobility programs. The importance of transportation as a poverty alleviation strategy is most evident in the recently enacted Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (known as TEA-21). This act authorizes $150 million in competitive grants annually over the next five years for Access to Jobs initiatives that include transportation assistance for welfare recipients and other low-income job seekers. In addition, the Department of Labor's welfare-to-work grants have included several awards to programs that depend primarily on transportation or include it as a major facet of their programs.

With so much money now being devoted to reverse commuting programs, many local agencies and organizations will soon be launching mobility programs. This report offers some key lessons about how to implement such initiatives that we and the five local Bridges to Work organizations have learned in nearly two years of operation.

A Snapshot of the Demonstration

Bridges to Work was designed to serve 3,100 persons over the four-year life of the demonstration, from 1996 to 2000. Using a random assignment design, each of four sites—Baltimore, Denver, Milwaukee and St. Louis—has up to 24 months in which to recruit 800 persons, half of whom are randomly assigned to a treatment group and half to a control group. Before random assignment, each applicant completes a baseline survey conducted on the telephone. The fifth site, Chicago, seeks to place 1,500 workers without the constraints of random assignment, to see if a reverse commute program can achieve scale.

Each accepted applicant who enters the treatment group may receive up to 18 months of Bridges to Work placement, transportation and retention services. People in the control group do not receive Bridges services but may reapply for them 18 months after their first random assignment. In the interim, they may seek services from other agencies or programs. All treatment and control group members are interviewed again 18 months after random assignment.

By the end of March 1999, the Bridges demonstration had been under way for almost two years. The first random assignment site completed its pilot phase and began implementation in June 1997, and the last site in August 1997. (Chicago began intake and placement in November 1996.) As of March 31, 1999, the four random assignment sites had enrolled 1,960 people, 982 of whom are eligible to receive Bridges services. To date, 599, or just over 61 percent, of these participants have been placed in jobs by Bridges. Chicago, Bridges' scale site, had recruited 669 people and placed 451, achieving a placement rate over 67 percent.

Bridges to Work's Original Design and Key Assumptions

Bridges was designed to test whether information, job placement assistance and transportation could connect job-ready inner-city workers to suburban employment. The design assumed that there were plenty of would-be workers ready and willing to work in the suburbs and that suburban employers would be willing to hire inner-city residents. In this scenario, the only roadblocks preventing workers and employers from connecting were knowledge about each other and the ability to get to and from work. Consequently, the five programs were to function as a labor market exchange—with the main services consisting of job matching and transportation coordination. There would be no training provided in either soft or hard skills, and participants would ideally be placed within a few days of being accepted into the program.

Three other key assumptions were explicitly or implicitly part of the original design:

- Recruitment of participants would be fairly easy. Either there would be enough unemployed job-ready people living in the "origin"[1] who would jump at the chance for a job in the suburbs, or other public and nonprofit employment providers would be willing to refer their graduates to Bridges for placement. (Bridges was not thought to be a competitor since it was placing people in the suburbs and was willing to give the referral agency credit for the placement.)
- Bridges sites could target fairly small geographic areas to recruit applicants—i.e., there would be plenty of job-ready people living in close proximity. (Bridges to Work was designed when the economy was just emerging from the last recession, when unemployment rates, particularly in central cities, were considerably higher.)
- Because Bridges was recruiting job-ready applicants who either had been prepared by other employment organizations or had extensive work experience, or both, sites did not need to build in extensive skills preparation, nor did they need to worry about people's ability to hold onto a job once placed.

Bridges Confronts Reality

When we launched Bridges to Work, we thought that the employment component would be straightforward and the transportation complicated. We quickly realized that the heart of any employment strategy (whether it includes transportation or not) depends first on the ability of the program to match prospective workers to jobs successfully. Although it would be misleading to say that the transportation has been simple, in the end, the logistics of taking people from point A to point B is an inherently solvable problem. On the other hand, the basics of employment—recruitment, assessment, preparation, placement and support of job seekers—has been an ongoing challenge for all of the Bridges sites, even those with many years of employment experience. This lesson is a useful reminder for policymakers and program practitioners considering an initiative like Bridges to Work: *success is likely to depend just as much if not more on an organization's ability to perform workforce development functions well, as on its knowledge and familiarity with transportation.* Of course, transporting people to jobs is more than a trivial program enhancement. It is a major logistical challenge that requires constant staff time and attention. But, in the end, unless organizations are good at the job-matching process, there will be lots of empty seats on the bus.

Recruitment

Through the early months of Bridges, all five sites struggled with recruitment of job-ready candidates. This difficulty resulted, in part, from an early assumption that recruitment would be easy—based on the large number of poor people living in the targeted communities and the number of training providers that said they were interested in collaborating with Bridges. Unfortunately, this did not prove to be the case, which in hindsight seemed to result from three factors:

- Strong economic growth provided many job seekers with nearby employment opportunities, reducing the pool of easy-to-place people.
- In many cases, the Bridges programs were new and did not have sufficient credibility on the street to draw people in. Residents of poor communities have seen programs come and go without making much of a difference and tend to be somewhat skeptical of new initiatives. This skepticism may have been heightened by the fact that recruits were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups in four of the five sites—meaning that they only had a one out of two chance of getting in even if they passed the other intake criteria.
- Public and nonprofit employment organizations proved unwilling to refer their graduates to Bridges.

This last factor, the reluctance of local government entities and training providers to work with Bridges, was in some respects the biggest surprise and disappointment to the five program operators and to P/PV, especially in the early stages of the demonstration. Each of the sites had gone through a lengthy project planning process. P/PV and the funders had required that the agency overseeing the planning in each city bring to the table local employment training organizations who were likely to refer program graduates to Bridges. During the planning stages, these collaborations appeared strong and enduring. These agencies endorsed Bridges' goals and strategies and seemed eager to exploit Bridges' ability to offer job seekers what they could not—suburban placements and transportation—because of lack of funding and limits imposed by categorical funding sources.

These collaborations proved elusive. The organizations that did work with Bridges tended to be churches, self-help groups, YMCAs and other community groups. But employment training providers, those that had been at the planning table, and others, too, stayed away for several reasons:

- The strong economy meant that other employment programs had plenty of demand for their graduates. The only program graduates that other programs were typically willing to refer to Bridges were those they had the greatest trouble placing.
- Despite the fact that Bridges was not competing for "placement credit," some organizations still regarded Bridges as a competitor and were reluctant to offer help.
- The demonstration's random assignment process discouraged some program operators from making referrals, fearing that those who were assigned to the control group would simply come back to them—resenting the fact they had been referred to Bridges in the first place.

Some lessons for prospective operators seeking partners emerge from Bridges' collaboration experiences:

- Programs that intend to rely on partners for participant referrals should negotiate more than "agreements in principle." They should clarify with prospective partners up front how the referral process will work, what each partner's expectations and intentions are, which participants can be referred and which cannot, what steps an applicant must take, and so on. If the collaboration is necessary to program operations, it may be worth the time and investment to hammer out formal, written agreements covering these arrangements, including the number and qualifications of people to be served.
- Though eager and willing, collaborators may not be able to produce what they promise. In Bridges, some organizations that were willing to help turned out to be able to provide little more than a venue for Bridges' outreach to program participants. Agency staff proved unwilling, unable or too inexperienced to explain Bridges adequately, schedule application appointments or administer Bridges' data collection forms. Bridges' staff had to step in, often at the last minute, to do most of the nitty-gritty outreach work.

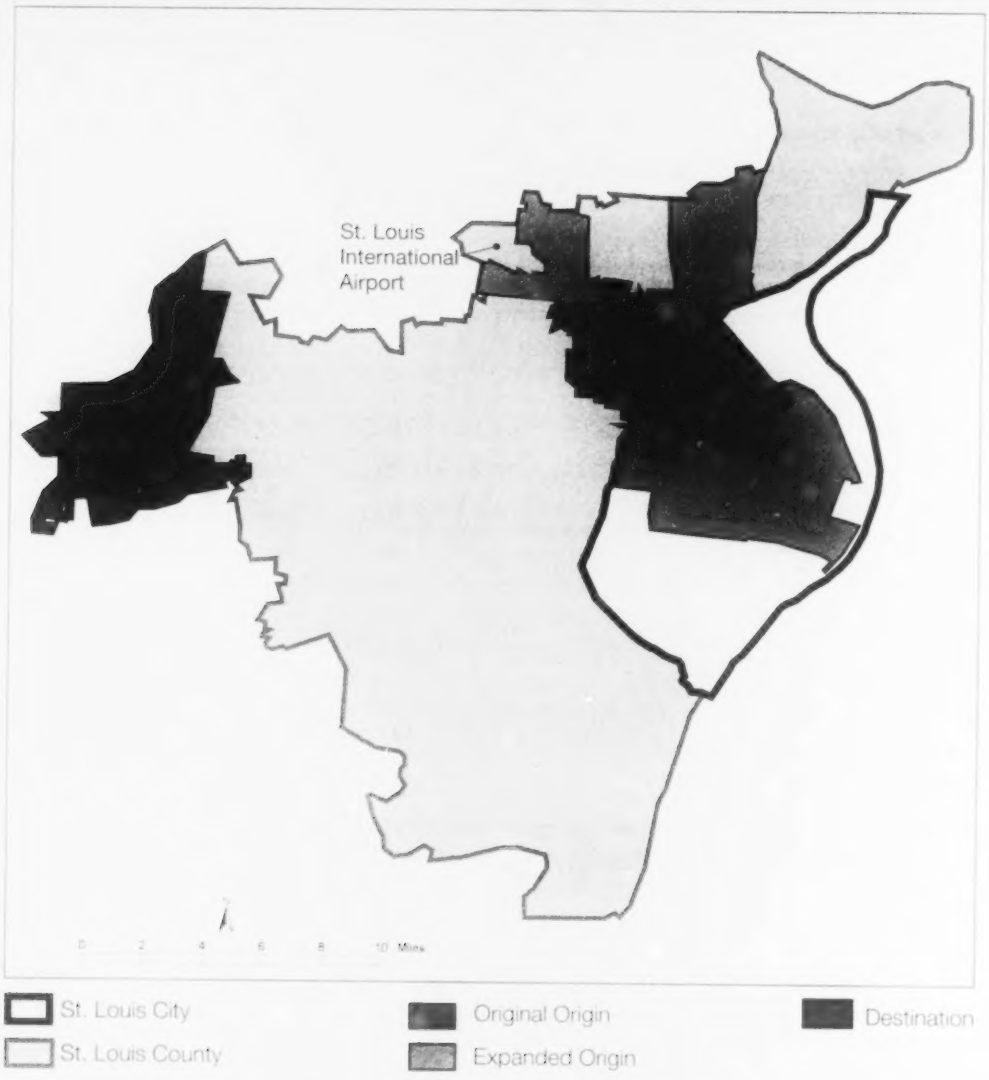
Once it became clear that referral partners were not going to send many good candidates, the Bridges sites were forced to rethink recruitment. At most sites, this revision was two-pronged: program operators both expanded their origin neighborhoods and implemented more creative and flexible approaches to outreach.

The map below illustrates how the first approach played out in Bridges in St. Louis. Here, the project planners mapped several neighborhoods from which they could recruit applicants over the life of the demonstration. According to their original proposal to HUD, they felt confident that these would produce a sufficient number of applicants, though they held open the possibility of expanding at a later date.

The original recruitment area is depicted in the darkly shaded area in Figure 1. After several months of operation, East-West Gateway Coordinating Council, the St. Louis Bridges operator, felt that it could not recruit sufficient riders from these communities and applied to HUD to expand the geographic boundaries of its origin to include the lightly shaded neighborhoods. The St. Louis origin now includes a substantial share of the city's population and covers a wide geographic area.

Virtually the same kind of expansion occurred at each of the other four sites and seemed unavoidable, despite P/PV's concerns about the strain that these

Figure 1:
St. Louis Bridges to Work Origin and Destination Areas



expansions might impose on project staff and transportation providers, given that the project budgets were fixed and additional resources unlikely to materialize during the demonstration.

Even more important than expanding the origins were the efforts that sites made to "think outside the box" about recruitment and to invest in and implement new ways—new to Bridges, that is—to reach out to applicants. Once operators realized that referral partners were unlikely to produce a sizable number of referrals, they had to radically alter their approaches. What Bridges did in Denver illustrates this point.

The Denver planners at the Curtis Park Community Center originally intended to rely on other agencies to refer qualified work-ready adults to the program. When this did not materialize, staff began experimenting with several recruitment strategies: newspaper ads, TV and radio spots, both paid and public service announcements (PSAs), flyers delivered door-to-door to residents of the origin, appearances at job

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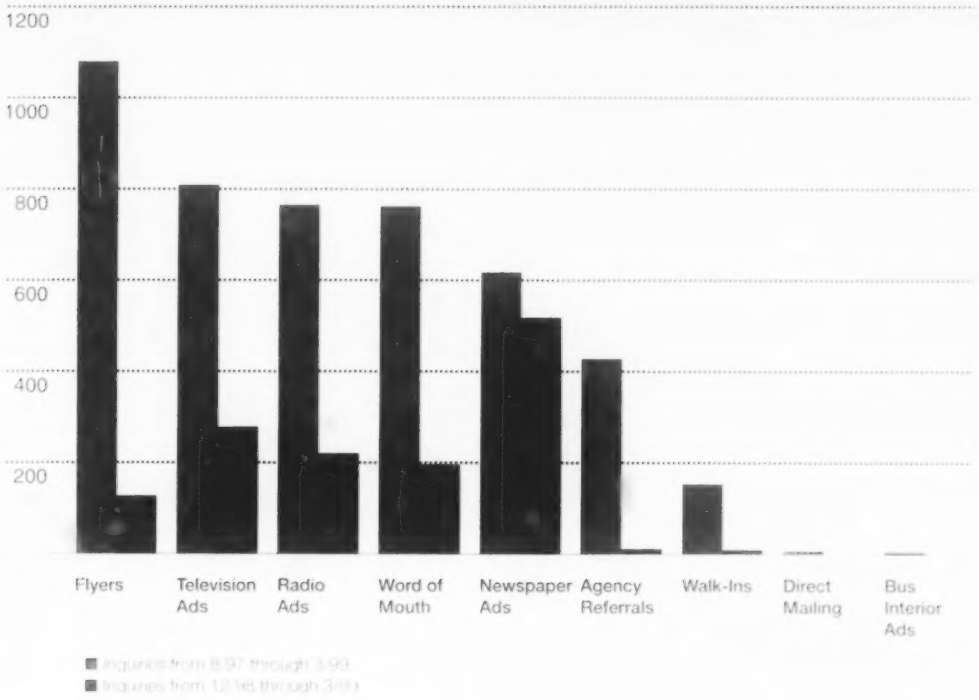
Figure 2:
Denver Bridges to Work Number of Inquiries by Referral Source

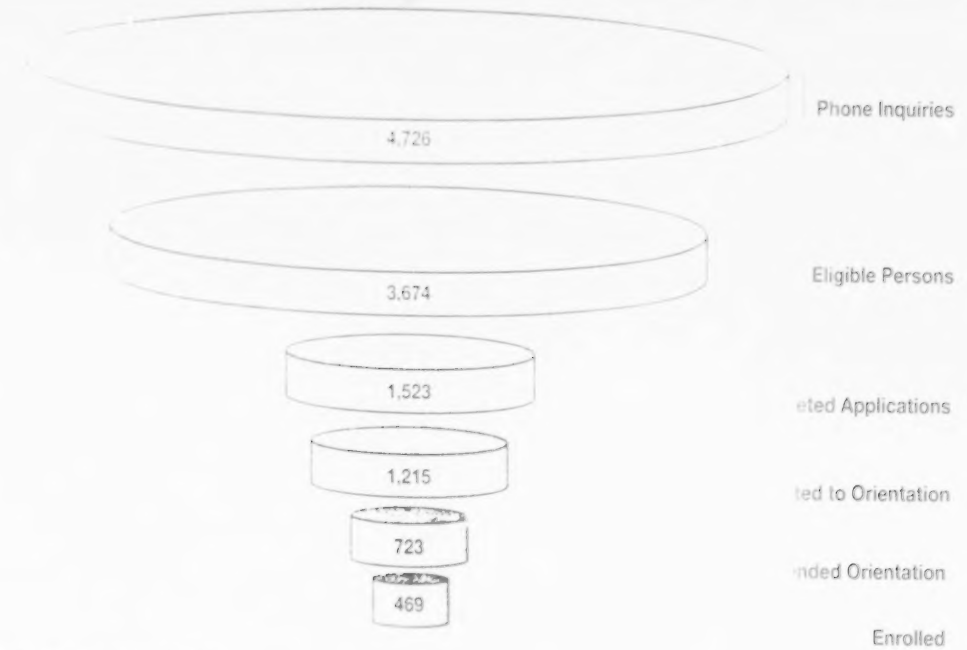


fairs, speaking at neighborhood events, and placement of Bridges signs and posters inside city buses. Denver even offered financial incentives to current riders who recruited other participants.

At first, staff used one of these methods at a time, and for a time each produced a flurry of applications. Staff thought they had solved the recruitment puzzle—until the number of applicants from this source began to decline; they would then scurry to devise and implement yet another outreach campaign. Bridges staff in Denver soon realized that no one technique would solve their recruitment needs and that they needed to pursue all of them, emphasizing those that seemed to be working well and tinkering with those that were unproductive. When advertisements in one paper failed to produce results, they shifted them to other papers. Similarly, if radio spots playing on one station were no longer effective, staff would move them to a different station. In some cases, staff realized that a particular technique was not working because of how it was being implemented. For example, when a local television station moved the Bridges PSAs to the early hours of the morning, intake from this once-reliable source dropped. When staff discovered the problem and had the station move the PSA to a better time, recruitment picked up.

By the end of March 1999, Denver's recruitment strategies had resulted in almost 5,000 inquiries about the program. Over the 21 months since Denver's program began, the referral sources that have produced the most inquiries have been flyers, televised PSAs, radio advertisements and word of mouth, in that order, as Figure 2 shows. In the last four months, Denver has found that newspaper advertisements have produced the most inquiries, particularly those placed in the *Thrifty Nickel*, a free weekly classified publication in which people advertise job openings, personal services, or items they

Figure 3:
Denver Bridges to Work Recruitment Funnel



wish to buy, sell or trade. Word of mouth has also become more commonly cited among those asking about the program, presumably reflecting the site's growing reputation. This more recent experience demonstrates that recruitment can vary significantly over the course of the program and that staff need to remain open to pursuing different strategies.

But even this renewed flexibility and creativity on the part of the Denver staff has not eliminated the challenge of recruiting a significant number of program applicants in the current economic climate. A recent look at Denver's recruitment funnel in Figure 3 reveals that sites have to expect that a substantial proportion of the people who inquire about a program will not pursue it long enough to become participants. In the end, Denver Bridges has found that it takes 10 inquiries to yield a single program entry.

Program staff across the five sites have expanded their outreach efforts beyond the traditional networks of referral sources and have begun reaching out directly to prospective job seekers wherever they can be found: at schools, religious organizations, housing projects, shopping centers, community colleges, mass transit stations and homeless shelters. Baltimore Bridges has sponsored live radio remote broadcasts, in which they pay popular local stations to promote Bridges recruitment drives being held in high schools and shopping centers in their origin communities. These approaches require staff in all five Bridges sites to spend considerable time in the community—frequently during evenings and on weekends, and staff must be at ease in a variety of settings and with a wide range of prospective applicants.

A Snapshot of the Participants

By the end of March 1999, 1,960 people had been randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups. Almost all are African American (83.4%) and there is roughly the same percentage of men (51.8%) as of women (48.2%). Nearly one-third (31.4%) of participants live with at least one child aged five years or younger, while 11.5 percent live with two or more children aged five years or younger. Several of the Bridges sites require a high school diploma or GED as a condition of program participation. Thus, only a modest percentage of applicants (18.7%) lack either a high school diploma or GED.

While Bridges to Work does not target welfare recipients, many participants either received or lived in a household that received public assistance at some point in their lives. At the time they joined Bridges, 27.5 percent of the women were current AFDC or TANF recipients, and 69.3 percent had received AFDC at some point.

Bridges to Work staff report that an ever-increasing number of employers require a criminal records check or drug screen prior to hiring. In many cases, this complicates the Bridges job placement effort since 30.6 percent of applicants report that they had been convicted of a crime, while 10.8 percent reported using illegal drugs in the past year.

Many Bridges applicants have had some exposure to the suburbs: 73.4 percent visited the suburbs in the past year, 15.4 percent had lived in a suburb in the past 10 years, 46.1 percent had family members or friends currently living in a suburb, and 53.6 percent had previously looked for a job in the suburbs. Many (76.6%) say they would consider moving to a different home or neighborhood within 18 months of enrollment in Bridges to Work, and 31.5 percent would consider moving to the suburbs over that same period.

To qualify for participation in Bridges, an applicant must have a genuine transportation need and no access to a vehicle that can be used for commuting. Some no doubt will cease using Bridges transportation for one reason or another, but it seems unlikely that many will buy cars in the near future, since only 34.1 percent of Bridges participants possess valid drivers' licenses.

Bridges to Work applicants have had extensive exposure to the labor market: 28.1 percent reported being employed either part- or full-time at the time of application, and only 11.9 percent had not worked for pay in more than one year. Almost 55 percent reported that at some point in their lives they had worked at the same job for two or more consecutive years, more than half of them for four or more years.

The need to develop a strong recruitment effort will depend on an organization's credibility in the community, its relationships with key public and nonprofit institutions, and, of course, the strength of the local economy. A strong organization running a mobility program in a weak economy will not have much trouble bringing in candidates, but our experience indicates that in a strong economy groups must be prepared to mount an extensive, tireless and creative recruitment campaign.

Job Readiness

P/PV and the participating organizations built the demonstration believing that there would be a substantial pool of job-ready candidates interested in working in the suburbs, an assumption which soon proved overly optimistic. This was caused, in part, by the unwillingness of other training providers to refer good candidates to Bridges. It also may have been exacerbated by many job-ready people finding employment as a result of strong job growth. In any case, our experience is that most people participating in Bridges were not job-ready and needed assistance preparing for work. So, after the first few

months of operation, the Bridges sites enhanced their orientation and intake process by adding one to three days of job readiness training. Such support generally focused on the critical "soft" skills of punctuality, not leaving work early or quitting without giving proper notice, dressing appropriately, leaving personal problems at home, taking instruction and getting along with coworkers. No doubt many would argue that one to three days of training is too short (and we would agree).

Our experience suggests that program operators need to take action to ensure that participants are prepared to work, whether the jobs are in the suburbs or anywhere else. Assuming that someone is work-ready simply because they are a high school graduate or have recent work experience is likely to be a mistake.

Job Development and Placement

One of our key assumptions that *has* proved accurate is some employers in every city are willing and often eager to work with Bridges. Bridges' sites have placed people in several hundred firms in a variety of industries.

The five Bridges sites have used a combination of staff-led job development and participant-directed job search to connect applicants to employment. Denver, Milwaukee and St. Louis have relied principally on job development, in which one or more staff are responsible for developing job leads and arranging interviews for participants. While some time is spent visiting companies and making in-person presentations, most staff time is spent working the phones and faxing resumes to employers.

Though there are many job openings in the suburban areas that Bridges is targeting, only some are appropriate for Bridges' participants. Because recruitment has been a major hurdle at all of the sites, job development has generally been tailored to the participants' needs. In a weaker economy, with fewer jobs and more applicants, recruitment would be adapted to the available jobs. Over time, Bridges staff have developed a strong sense of the range of jobs that are available at companies in the destination as well as the types of jobs most participants are seeking. This enables them to decide fairly quickly during the intake process whether they can meet an applicant's needs.

At the Bridges' sites that rely heavily on job development, staff have learned that it is critical to include job development staff in deciding about whether to accept an applicant. In each case, staff discuss what type of jobs in specific firms they believe the candidate is suitable for.

Chicago and Baltimore have relied more on participants conducting their own job search, although Baltimore has stepped up its job development effort recently. Chicago staff feel strongly that job applicants will do better calling companies and knocking on doors in their destination than if the staff make the initial contact. Staff feel that if they make the initial contact companies will think that there is something wrong with the applicant who appears to need help from what the companies perceive is a social services program.

In Baltimore, job search was the predominant approach to placement. However, staff felt that too many applicants were giving up before they got placed, hurting the site's placement rates, so they have developed a much stronger job development component. Now job developers are included in the orientation and intake process and have a strong say about whether to accept applicants. Placement rates have gone up in recent months.

One of the key aspects of successful job placement in Bridges is speed. Because the programs work with applicants for just a few days before they become official participants, it is critical to send them on interviews as quickly as possible. Denver staff begin faxing resumes of people on

Table 1:
Bridges to Work Placements and Current Ridership

Site	Total Number of Participants	Total Number of People Placed	Current Riders (March 31, 1999)
Baltimore	263	149	60
Denver	236	156	50
Milwaukee	268	183	46
St. Louis	215	111	57
Chicago	669	451	47
All Sites	1,651	1,050	260

the day they are accepted into the program and generally are able to schedule interviews for the following week. If participants do not find a job within approximately two weeks, they tend to become discouraged and often drop out of the program.

Chicago and Milwaukee focus on placing people in manufacturing firms, which are plentiful in their destinations. This industry, or sectoral, focus enables the sites to target their job development efforts and to develop strong relationships with particular employers. It also means they must recruit people who are interested in these types of jobs. Not surprisingly, the majority of their applicants are men. Although Baltimore has targeted a wider range of industries and firms, and is consequently able to serve a more diverse range of interests among potential applicants, it also relies heavily on nursing homes for a substantial number of placements. Most openings in these firms are for certified nursing assistants, who usually are female. Denver and St. Louis do not have an identifiable industry focus. Denver staff target openings in four areas: labor, retail, hospitality and office. They maintain a notebook with job descriptions in each of these areas, which each Bridges applicant is required to review before intake and assessment. Only those applicants with a strong interest in at least one of these areas are accepted into the program.

Employment Retention

Providing employment retention services was not part of the original design. Our implicit expectation was that most job-ready urban residents would be able to stay employed once Bridges connected them to a job and provided transportation. Other than the transportation itself, little follow-up support was to be provided—unless the worker or employers asked for it.

After it became apparent that Bridges' applicants were not as job ready as had been expected, employment retention needed to be addressed. This concern was magnified when sites began reporting high attrition and that ridership was lower than expected given the number of placements that had been made, as delineated in Table 1. (Current ridership does not capture those participants who still have jobs in the destination, but have other ways of getting to work; nor does it include participants who may have found new jobs outside the destination since being placed by Bridges. We will have a clear understanding of participants' overall employment rates once the demonstration is over and the follow-up surveys have been completed.)

Although sites are constrained by their budgets, each has been instituting plans to support recently placed applicants in order to boost employment retention. These plans include early and regular phone contact; special events and dinners; alumni get-togethers; and retention rewards, such as t-shirts, mugs or watches. All sites are attempting to re-place participants who have lost their jobs.

Working with Employers

As noted earlier, one of the premises of Bridges to Work was that strong job growth in suburban communities would make employers receptive to inner-city workers, as long as they were prepared to work and showed up on time. By and large, this supposition has been borne out by our experience. Although not every employer responds positively to Bridges' staff presentations, the historic economic boom of the last several years has employers scrambling to fill vacancies. Enough have been receptive to Bridges to ensure a steady and substantial supply of jobs. This does not mean that it is simple to match jobs to applicants on a day-to-day basis, and indeed Bridges staff devote considerable time trying to ensure good matches.

Since the start of the demonstration in November 1996, close to 400 employers had hired one or more of the 1,050 Bridges applicants placed in a job. Nearly 39.8 percent of Bridges' employers are in the service industry, 26.2 percent are in manufacturing and 8.9 percent are in retail.[1] (These proportions vary substantially by site. In Chicago and Milwaukee, for example, most placements are in manufacturing companies.) Most people are placed in small companies: the median number of employees is 60, and one out of five has 20 or fewer workers.

Most employers have hired one or two Bridges' participants. Over time, however, each of the five sites has developed strong relationships with a few employers who have made multiple hires. Developing long-term relationships with employers who are willing to do repeat business is key to any employment initiative. Once such employers' needs have been clearly defined and the relationship developed, it becomes much easier to recruit appropriate candidates and place them quickly.

While employers have been willing to try Bridges, it is also clear that they do not rely on Bridges or other government programs when they need to fill positions. When we asked employers to list the two main methods of recruiting entry-level workers, 69.3 percent reported advertising in newspapers, 53.6 percent used employee referrals, 20.1 percent accepted applications from unsolicited "walk-ins" and only 14.5 percent recruited through government programs. These techniques enable employers to fill vacancies quickly: over 70 percent said openings were filled in two weeks or less. Speed is apparently as important for employers as it is for applicants. Neither group is willing to wait long to have its needs met.

Meeting Employers' Needs

Much emphasis has been placed in the last few years on the need for employment programs to do a better job of meeting employers' needs. Publicly subsidized programs have been criticized for focusing most of their attention on serving their participants, with little concern about the implications for the companies in which they were placed. From the beginning of the demonstration, Bridges' sites have been encouraged to balance employers' and job seekers' interests. Employers have generally not had overly high expectations of Bridges. Most employers express willingness to provide on-the-job training to new employees to give them the technical or hard skills to do the job. But they universally and unequivocally want employees who are eager, dependable workers who dress appropriately, show up on time, take direction from a supervisor, leave personal issues at home and maintain civil, if not cordial, relations with coworkers. They also want good attendance, adequate advance notice in the event of lateness or absences, and a willingness to learn any skills needed.

While achieving an appropriate balance between serving employers and participants has not been easy, Bridges' sites have put in place several complementary practices in their efforts to do so:

- Intake and orientation are designed to identify motivated, job-ready applicants. Would-be participants generally have to return to the program site a number of times, show up on time, dress appropriately and interact with staff and co-applicants in a positive, forthcoming manner. In addition, some sites only accept people who they believe can be placed in a company that staff know well.
- Although the sites work hard to place as many of the accepted applicants as possible and will re-place workers when they lose their jobs, they also will discontinue working with applicants who have performed poorly. Denver, for example, will no longer work with 77 of its 236 participants who, they now believe, will hurt their relationships with employers.
- At the same time, the sites are careful about which employers they target. Because health insurance is vital for most applicants, Bridges' staff prefer employers who provide health benefits. To date, nearly 90 percent of Bridges' employers offer workers health coverage after 90 days.

Of course, mobility programs must also be able to get workers to their jobs on time, otherwise employers will quickly sour on the program regardless of how effective its other services are. Bridges sites have been able to meet employers' (and riders') need and desire for timely transportation fairly well. But when the transportation has faltered because of changing vendors, new drivers, bad weather or poor service, employers have been quick to complain to Bridges' staff.

Employee Retention

Most of the Bridges' sites anticipated providing assistance to employers and employees on the work site: conflict resolution, crisis intervention, diversity training and the like. While most employers say they appreciate the availability of such services, in practice very few welcome outsiders into the workplace to resolve personnel disputes among workers or between workers and supervisors. Although on occasion employers have called Bridges' staff for assistance handling a Bridges worker, by and large they want the program to simply help them recruit and transport job-ready workers and leave personnel matters to the company. They are not interested in social programs or interventions—or as one said, "just another alphabet program," unless programs help them meet their bottom line goals. They expect to treat program participants just as they do all their employees, and they want supervisors to handle such problems as repeated tardiness, unexplained absences and poor attitudes uniformly. (This does not mean they oppose employment retention efforts made outside the workplace.)

The Ride

In virtually every major metropolitan region of the United States, public transit does not adequately link inner-city neighborhoods with job opportunities in the suburbs. Even where public transit attempts to provide city-to-suburb service, riders typically must make so many time-consuming and costly transfers that using the system for employment is exhausting, if not altogether impractical. The challenge for a mobility strategy is to design, provide and manage transportation services that forge those geographic links; that recognize the challenge of serving a population that may make frequent job and address changes and relies entirely on public transit for mobility; and that responds quickly and efficiently to work schedule changes, unexpected overtime and personal emergencies.

Four key principles should guide the operator through the planning and implementation of the program's transportation services:

- Routes and schedules should be flexible and as extensive as possible.
- The service must be punctual and reliable.
- The service must respond quickly to unplanned events and emergencies.
- The program should resist the temptation to provide transportation for child care and other purposes.

Routes and schedules should be flexible and as extensive as possible.

The Bridges to Work experience to date has shown that an employment transportation program must have the ability to make fairly rapid changes in routes and schedules in order to serve existing employers' demands, to swiftly and efficiently recruit new employers to the program, and to better serve the workers who use the transportation. An employment transportation project will have to move quickly if it wants to take advantage of the interest expressed by an employer who is located off the established project routes or schedules and who wants to make a reasonable number of hires (reasonable being determined, of course, in light of the costs and complications involved in adding transportation services to secure those jobs). The same flexibility is essential when a participating employer wants to add a second or third shift or whose production projections indicate a lengthy period of required—and well-paying—overtime. The transit service should enable the program to take full advantage of these kinds of opportunities, unencumbered by the need for approval by local authorities or unions or other potential impediments.

Three of the five Bridges sites began the demonstration with transportation services that operated primarily during daylight hours and followed fixed routes and schedules. After a period of time, the project operators in St. Louis and Denver, feeling constrained by the limitations their transportation imposed on job development and placement, modified Bridges transportation by switching to providers that offered more flexible and extensive service. This change has enabled those programs to reach out to more employers and serve more shifts, and therefore to increase the chances for good job matching.

Complications may arise as program operators attempt to craft routes and schedules—even when employers all operate the same shift. The Chicago Bridges to Work program commissioned a survey of first-shift start times at manufacturing firms located in the project's destination; the 1,045 firms responding to the survey reported nine different first-shift start times between 5:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. Consider what this means for an employment transportation project that should—as we believe a Bridges-like program should—serve all three shifts and weekends. The transportation provider would have to make several runs to the destination each morning in order to

provide a reasonable commute for the riders. After all, riders whose jobs begin at 8:30 a.m do not want to begin their commutes at the same time as workers who begin at 6:00 a.m. It may be argued, of course, that people who really want to work should not complain about waiting two hours for their shift to begin, when, after all, they are getting door-to-door transportation. This kind of endurance and determination may make for heroic stories, but planning a program around such an expectation is not a likely winning long-term strategy. And the argument ignores the complications that many workers—especially low-wage earners—face when they have to also find and pay for reliable and convenient child care. The longer a worker spends commuting, the more complicated child care arrangements become, particularly when they involve early morning or evening hours. While we do not yet know what constitutes a "reasonable" commute, it is clear that a very long commute does not increase the chance that a worker will remain in the program and on the job.

Good job matching may also require that transportation services cover all shifts, including nights and weekends. The common denominators in the population recruited for a Bridges-like program are low skills, erratic labor market experience and minimal soft skills. Many jobs, especially at the entry level, are likely to occur in the hospitality, health care and light manufacturing sectors, and will require evening and weekend work, overtime and extra shifts. An employment transportation program serving only, or primarily, first-shift Monday to Friday jobs will offer only limited opportunities for program participants.

A senior manager of a long-term health care facility in a Bridges destination was eager to hire Bridges participants but expressed concern about what was then Bridges' inability to provide weekend transportation. She said she would "try" Bridges because she routinely had difficulty recruiting and retaining employees for food service, housekeeping and nursing assistant positions. In fact, she reluctantly agreed to give a few Bridges participants positions on the first shift—positions that usually went to proven, senior employees who had earned the right to work Monday to Friday, 9 to 5. But after several weeks, although the director wanted to hire more Bridges to Work participants, she said they would have to work their fair share of evening and weekend shifts. She reported that, when she ignored the traditional staffing patterns and put new hires into coveted first-shift positions, incumbent employees complained that the Bridges hires were getting preferential treatment. This strained workplace relations and threatened to limit the viability of continued placements by the project.

The service must be punctual and reliable.

Employers and riders, of course, count on unstinting ability to provide on-time service. For their part, riders will insist on reaching their jobs as close as possible to the start time of their shifts and on being picked up on time at the end of their shifts. One Milwaukee Bridges to Work participant complained that he had to wait 15 minutes after his shift ended for the van to pick him up. He had worked a 12-hour shift on the plant floor, where the temperature reached nearly 100 degrees; he was tired and dirty and wanted to get a full night's sleep before the next day's 12-hour shift started. Is a 15-minute wait reasonable or not? Perhaps, perhaps not; "reasonable" may depend on a lot of factors. And if a 15-minute wait is reasonable, when does the wait become too long? Whatever the answer, this example underscores the necessity of providing reliable service that riders and employers can count on and that enhances the chances of job retention and employer loyalty.

The service must respond quickly to unplanned events and emergencies.

At some point, a worker will have to get home in the middle of a workday. Maybe she is sick; maybe her child's caregiver calls to say her child is sick. The anxieties and complications inherent in these emergencies are exacerbated when work is in a distant location, where the potential may already exist for workers to feel isolated. To alleviate this concern, Bridges to Work guarantees a ride home in the event of a personal—not work-related—emergency. At the Bridges sites, local taxi companies usually provide the "guaranteed ride home" service under contract to the project management or the transportation provider; at one site the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization provides the service through its existing ride-share van service. The mode matters less than ensuring that a ride is arranged swiftly once the emergency arises. So far in Bridges to Work, emergency rides home have been rarely used and virtually never abused; but the inclusion of the service in the transportation plan appears to give employers and workers a much-needed measure of security when they consider this new set of relationships. As one Bridges' participant said, "It's a comfort to me knowing that I could get to my kids quicker if something happened to them."

More complicated is the question of unplanned job-related issues. Employers may abruptly change schedules, adding or deleting shift times with little or no notice to workers. Some will require that employees stay "until the work is done." In a food distribution plant in Baltimore's Bridges destination, for instance, workers must stay at the job until all perishable foods are loaded onto delivery trucks. Or, in retail and health care settings, supervisors may require double shifts or overtime on short notice. The implications are numerous. For instance, the transportation provider may need to rearrange pick-up times and locations to avoid leaving some riders waiting overly long while others complete their overtime or extra shift work. Or it may have to provide unscheduled service to make sure no rider is left stranded or unreasonably delayed.

An employment transportation program that makes placements in these kinds of settings will need to devise a transportation scheduling system that can make these quick adjustments. An alternative is to concentrate job development efforts on employers in industries and in locations that are least likely to place these demands on the transportation service. At the Bridges to Work sites that have contracted with private, for-profit services, and the one that uses not-for-profit services, project managers are able to make last-minute scheduling or routing adjustments. The other sites rely heavily on public transit, which require them to mostly work with employers who do not often require unplanned overtime.

Programs should carefully weigh the consequences of providing transportation for child care and other purposes.

Operating high-quality, efficient, flexible, punctual transportation service to get people to and from work is hard enough without imposing on the service the demands of getting people and their children to the day care center. We appreciate that finding affordable, high-quality, accessible child care is a major issue for working parents. It may be an especially tough one for low-income parents who are likely to find good employment at locations relatively far from home and that may require night and weekend work. Most observers report a shortage of child care facilities in poor communities, and parents without the luxury of their own vehicles, who must rely on other forms of transportation, face the extra challenges of getting the kids to and from child care before the workday begins or ends.

Nonetheless, we strongly discourage integrating trips to and from child care centers into the routes and schedules of an employment-focused transportation system like Bridges to Work. The aspiration to serve the full range of transportation needs that arise in the lives of low-skilled, low-income workers may be the right one, but the reality is likely to be vastly different; the potential for increased cost, time, complications and inconvenience is great, perhaps great enough to threaten or scuttle the effort altogether. More stops, added time, sick children, anxious parents, and the few extra minutes it takes to talk to the teacher or gather up the child's belongings are distractions from the main mission of the employment mobility effort, and all are likely to impede the punctuality and reliability of the service. And in no small part, it will inconvenience the riders who do not have children (over two-thirds of Bridges participants, for instance, do not have children aged five or younger in their households) by increasing the length of their commutes.

The only special circumstance associated with the link between child care and an employment transportation program is the fear of being "trapped" in the suburbs when an emergency arises and a parent must return home, or get to the caregiver, in the middle of a workday. Bridges to Work successfully handles these rare occurrences through the guaranteed ride home service previously discussed. That assurance, combined with punctual service and the shortest possible commute time and distance, minimizes the time that a parent spends away from her/his child and is the best way an employment transportation program can respond to a parent's child care issues.

Other Lessons

Although these are the most important considerations in the development of an effective transportation system, there are a number of other lessons we have learned about the transportation component of Bridges to Work.

Include the transportation provider early in the program planning process.

The Bridges sites that were able to identify and bring on board their transportation providers during their initial planning avoided many program design and early implementation problems. In Milwaukee and Baltimore and, to a lesser extent, in Denver, experienced representatives of transportation companies were involved in key decisions regarding origin and destination communities, routing and scheduling. Developing a close relationship with the transportation service has also enabled the sites to make sure that the drivers assigned to Bridges are responsible and supportive of the program. In some instances, where good relationships have developed with the transportation companies, drivers have become an excellent source of information about which participants are not showing up or may be having other problems on the job.

Select a transportation provider with the capacity and vehicles that best fit your program.

Four of the five Bridges sites were launching new programs; only Chicago was building on a long-standing reverse commuting effort. In each of the four other cities, building ridership was clearly going to take time, and it was critical that the transportation provider be flexible and responsive to changes in ridership. In these cities, transportation is provided using 14-passenger vans—large enough to achieve some economies of scale, but small enough to respond to changes in the number and location of Bridges' participants. Until projects demonstrate that they can achieve appropriate scale and geographic density of riders, it is a mistake to

add new mass transit routes to serve suburban areas. In Denver, for example, the public transit agency agreed to provide new bus service between the origin community and the Tech Center, 30 miles to the south, as the project was getting launched. Very soon it was apparent that this was the wrong mode of transportation, as the buses rode practically empty.

At the same time, mobility programs would be making a mistake to contract with small companies to provide the bulk of their transportation service. Often these firms are not able to respond quickly to increases in riders or changes in routes, because they have too few vehicles or drivers. Bridges sites have contracted with smaller firms to provide supplementary service.

Select firms whose main business is transportation.

This sounds pretty obvious, but major problems can arise if such advice is ignored. There are many organizations—churches, schools and other nonprofits—that have vans they may be willing to let the program use. In St. Louis, for example, Bridges contracted for transportation with a local division of the American Red Cross. This worked reasonably well while Bridges was starting up, but as soon as ridership started becoming significant, the Red Cross was no longer able to provide the same quality of service. Consequently, St. Louis was forced to change transportation providers in the middle of the program, which caused significant headaches. This leads us directly to the following recommendation.

Avoid changing transportation providers, unless there is absolutely no other alternative.

Three of Bridges' sites—St. Louis, Denver and Milwaukee—had to switch transportation providers. These changes were necessitated by lack of capacity, local public contracting requirements and the need to reduce spending. In each case, the change caused major logistical problems that required substantial staff effort to remedy. When the old providers learned that their contract was ending, they became much less punctual and responsive. This resulted in some missed rides and considerable lateness and inconvenience for the riders and their employers. Although employers have been quite understanding in most instances when this has occurred, they also have made it clear that they hold Bridges accountable for getting people to and from work on time.

Bringing on new providers has also not been easy. It has taken time for them to expand their capacity, learn the schedules and routes, and develop a working relationship with site staff, all of which is reasonable. But when riders are left standing on a street corner on a cold wintry morning for an extra 30 or 45 minutes before getting picked up, problems will quickly ensue, hurting employment retention and the program's reputation.

Metropolitan Labor Markets and Mobility Strategies

Developing a reverse commuting employment program requires program operators to simultaneously balance three related issues: the location and requirements of jobs, the residence and skills of job seekers, and the logistics of transporting workers to and from jobs. A mobility program ideally resembles a barbell: densely concentrated employers on one end and similarly concentrated workers on the other, connected by a direct and not-too-long transportation corridor. Under such circumstances, operating a program connecting workers and employers would be relatively easy and efficient. Large numbers of workers could be picked up near each other and dropped off at their jobs fairly quickly and efficiently.

Unfortunately, metropolitan labor markets are not organized so neatly. And as soon as one strays from the barbell model, remaining effective suddenly becomes much more challenging. Imagine, for example, that in order to find employment opportunities for residents of a community, employers need to be recruited over a larger geographic area. Or to meet the needs of a particular set of employers, workers must be recruited from several neighborhoods. Now the relatively straightforward process of transporting workers has become a major logistical headache.

And once program operators begin actually connecting workers to real jobs, the more vexing the challenge gets. For example, Suburban JobLink focuses on connecting job seekers living on the west side of Chicago with manufacturers in a fairly circumscribed industrial area near O'Hare Airport. In many ways, JobLink's program comes close to the idealized barbell scenario. But when it comes to placing people into jobs, we find not only that the openings are on different shifts—and often on the second, third and weekend shifts—but the shifts at one firm begin and end at different times than do the shifts at the next. JobLink has two choices: not to pursue a number of job opportunities in order to make its transportation tasks easier, or to fill any available opening and invest considerable time and resources to develop highly flexible and customized transportation.

Running a sound mobility strategy over the long term also requires practitioners to adapt to significant changes in the labor market. In a tight labor market with low unemployment rates, it is generally easier to find suburban employers willing to interview and hire inner-city workers. Consequently, it is possible for program operators to identify a significant number of job openings in a fairly small geographic area. Unfortunately, the very factors that lead to identification of numerous job possibilities make recruitment of work-ready job seekers hard. In tight labor markets, job seekers are by definition in more demand and have more choices about where and when to work. Consequently, in order to fill available openings, program operators may have to recruit workers over a wider geographic area. In addition, remaining job seekers may need more preparation and support to meet employers' expectations.

Presumably, in slack labor markets, the reverse is true: it may be quite easy to recruit a strong pool of job seekers from a particular community, but it may not be possible to place them in a tightly limited suburban area. Program operators are likely to have to work with employers who are more widely dispersed than is desirable in a mobility program. What makes this dynamic particularly challenging is the cyclical nature of the economy. To remain successful, program operators must continually adjust their strategies to the ebb and flow of the labor market.

Bridges to Work's experience demonstrates that transportation *alone* will do little to connect inner-city residents to suburban jobs. After Bridges sites put in place intensive recruitment, job preparation and, later, retention services, they were able to operate more effective

programs. These program changes resulted in substantial improvements in four of the five sites: intake increased severalfold, and sites achieved higher placement levels. Whether these changes will result in a significant impact on participants' employment and earnings remains to be seen.

Because mobility programs are particularly susceptible to the ups and downs of the labor market, they need flexible support in order to be able to adapt successfully to these changes. Such flexibility is hard to come by, of course—particularly in publicly funded endeavors. Policymakers will need to provide as much flexibility as they can given the constraints under which they operate, and program operators need to develop some sources of flexible money, perhaps through foundation grants or rider revenue.

Policymakers and program operators who are seeking to assist long-term welfare recipients and other disadvantaged groups—people who typically face even greater barriers to employment than Bridges recruits—need to be particularly careful in the design of their reverse commuting programs. Yes, lack of transportation prevents many poor people from reaching job-rich locations. But most low-income job seekers will need a variety of supports in order to get and stay employed. Attending to these elements in program design and implementation is essential.

Appendix: Site Descriptions

The five Bridges to Work demonstration sites share a number of characteristics. At each, urban residents are enrolled for the project from the "origin," the city neighborhood in which participants reside and from which they ride to the "destination" in the city's job-rich suburbs. Each project provides a targeted commuting service, that is, a ride on van or bus (or both) that connects the origin and destination, using routes and schedules that reduce commuting time and distance as much as possible and fills the gaps in public city-to-suburb transit services. In personal emergencies—illness, for instance—workers are guaranteed a ride home from work in the middle of their shift. Each project may also provide limited support services to participants and employers. Each has a project director who manages all day-to-day activities and a convener who has executed the Cooperative Agreement with HUD and bears overall responsibility for the project. We briefly describe each of the five sites below.

Baltimore. In East Baltimore, five Bridges to Work staff run the program from a small row house near the Johns Hopkins Hospital complex that has been rehabilitated and converted to offices for Bridges. Baltimore Bridges is part of the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition, which is one of six organizational entities that administer programs of the city's federal Empowerment Zone. Bridges participants are recruited from throughout East Baltimore and are placed in jobs in the BWI (Baltimore-Washington International Airport) area and in Howard and Anne Arundel counties. Bridges workers commute to their jobs in 14-passenger vans, purchased for the project, which transport riders from designated points in East Baltimore directly to their work-places. The vans are owned by Bridges to Work but are leased to Yellow Transportation, Inc., an experienced, private for-profit transit company that trains the drivers, handles all maintenance and liability costs, and works closely with the Bridges staff to manage the transportation routes and schedules. Riders pay $96 per month for this seven-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day service.

Chicago. Nine full-time Bridges staff and one full-time vehicle operator serve Bridges under the aegis of Suburban JobLink (SJL), a 30-year-old job placement and transporta-tion service for disadvantaged workers. Job development, placement and support activi-ties take place primarily at SJL's facility in Bensenville, a community that is part of one of the nation's largest industrial parks, on the edge of O'Hare International Airport. Staff recruit Bridges participants from several neighborhoods on Chicago's west side and place them in jobs in the industrial parks on O'Hare's fringe. Most commute to their jobs on 50-passenger buses operated by SJL and used also in its non-Bridges activities. Riders board the buses at locations in their neighborhoods and pay $4.00 per round trip.

Denver. Bridges to Work operates under the auspices of Curtis Park Community Center, a faith-based organization, under contract to the Mayor's Office of Employment and Training. Eight staff run the program out of the Children's Opportunity Program building, a multi-purpose human services facility in Denver's Five Points-Curtis Park section, 10 blocks from the heart of downtown Denver. Bridges participants come from throughout all the lower-income sections of the city and Arapahoe County. They are placed in jobs in Denver's southside I-25 corridor, primarily in the Denver Technological Center, the Denver West Office Park region and other Denver area suburbs. The targeted commute combines bus services provided by the Regional Transit District, the metro area's public transit provider and shuttle van services operated under a contract with a private for-profit vendor. An interim transportation vendor is currently providing shuttle services pending completion of a bid process to select a new, permanent con-tractor. Bridges participants ride free to and from work for 18 months.

Milwaukee. The Milwaukee Private Industry Council operates Bridges to Work out of its headquarters in downtown Milwaukee. Now that recruitment and intake have ended in Milwaukee, two people coordinate employment retention and transportation. Participants reside in neighborhoods in the northern and southern sections of the city and are placed in jobs in Washington County to the north, Waukesha County to the west, and Racine and Kenosha Counties to the south. Almost all reach their jobs on 14-passenger vans owned by and operated under contract with Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Wisconsin, a private not-for-profit transit provider, and two private for-profit providers: J & W Transport and TW Transport. Vans depart from three major pick-up points and take riders directly to their suburban work sites. Bridges participants receive free transportation for 18 months.

St. Louis. East-West Gateway Coordinating Council, the region's metropolitan planning organization, runs Bridges to Work from offices in downtown St. Louis. The five project staff recruit participants primarily from neighborhoods on the city's north central, northwestern and south end sections, and several inner-ring suburbs of neighboring St. Louis County, and place them in jobs in the Chesterfield Valley west of the city. The project's targeted commute combines bus service operated by the Bi-State Development Agency, the region's public transit agency, and van service operated by Abbott Transportation Services, a 30-year old, private not-for-profit ambulance and Medicaid transportation provider. Workers assemble at a Bi-State transit hub, from which they take Bridges van service to their workplaces in the destination. Riders pay $1.25 each way for the Bi-State portion of the trip and nothing for the Bridges van service.

Notes

1. *Poverty Trends: 1996.* Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1997.

2. Jargowsky, Paul. 1996. *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios and the American City.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

3. See Appendix for a description of each of the five sites.

4. "Origin" refers to the neighborhoods in which participants live and "destination" to the geographic area where Bridges' employers are located.

5. All figures other than the total number of employers, are based on the 193 employers for which we have complete data.

6. Children aged six or older will most likely be enrolled in neighborhood schools within walking distance of home or will have school-provided transportation.

Bridges to Work Contact List

Bridges to Work Baltimore

Linda Stewart-Byrd
Director/Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition
2026 McElderry Street
Baltimore, MD 21205
P: 410-614-5352
F: 410-614-8674

Bridges to Work Chicago

Robert Carter
Project Director, Suburban Job Link
1133 Tower Lane
Bensenville, IL 60106
P: 630-595-0010
F: 630-595-0081

Bridges to Work Denver

Mandi Huser
Project Director, Curtis Park Community Center
2500 Curtis Street, Suite 226
Denver, CO 80205
P: 303-292-3069
F: 303-292-2591

Bridges to Work Milwaukee

David Wilson
Project Director, Private Industry Council of Milwaukee County
101 W. Pleasant Street, Suite 201
Milwaukee, WI 53212
P: 414-270-1731
F: 414-225-2375

Bridges to Work St. Louis

Rosalind Staples-Streeter
Project Manager, East-West Gateway Coordinating Council
10 Stadium Plaza
St. Louis, MO 63102
P: 314-421-4220
F: 314-231-6120

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

James Hoben
Senior Community Planner
Office of Policy Development and Research
451 Seventh Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20410
P: 202-708-0574, ext.5705
F: 202-708-5873

Public/Private Ventures

Joseph P. Tierney
2005 Market Street, Suite 900
Philadelphia, PA 19103
P: 215-557-4473
F: 215-557-4469

Anne Roder
2005 Market Street, Suite 900
Philadelphia, PA 19103
P: 215-557-4473
F: 215-557-4469

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122 East 42nd Street, 41st Floor
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